

Bible Challenge 2018

Week 16a: April 15-21

Outline:

Ezra 1: Cyrus' Decree to Send the Israelites Home
Ezra 2: Zerubbabel Leads the First Wave to Jerusalem
Ezra 3: Temple Rebuilding Begins
Ezra 4: Adversaries Arise against the Rebuilding Project
Ezra 5-6: The Temple is Completed for Passover
Ezra 7-8: The Second Wave Returns to Jerusalem with Ezra
Ezra 9: Israel's Abomination and Ezra's Prayer
Ezra 10: The People's Confession

If you remember the close to 2 Chronicles and how it speaks of King Cyrus sending the people home after their seventy years in exile, we then are seeing this worked out in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Unlike the Babylonians who had conquered the southern kingdom of Judah and the Assyrians who had conquered the northern kingdom of Israel, Cyrus, who was Persian, held to a view that if you leave the people in their local regions and allow them to worship freely, they will be loyal to you. Thus he not only sent the Israelites home, he also provided them with the wealth and resources to rebuild the Temple, something he did with a number of religious sects in the regions he conquered.

In the case of the Jews, there would actually be two separate groups that would return. The first was led by Zerubbabel in 538 BC. He led a group of 42,360 former exiles back to Jerusalem along with their servants. Certainly this was not the whole of the people, but when you realize that many had acclimated to Babylonian life, had established businesses, and even had bought homes, it is easy to see how many would choose to stay. In addition, there were elderly who were unable to travel, disabled people who would not be able to handle the trip well, and others who simply had too many irons in the fire to drop everything and pick up and go. When you also realized that seventy years had been spent in Babylon, it is easy to see that some of the people had been born there and would know nothing about the ancient city. The Second group would be led by Ezra himself would lead the second group about 80 years later in 458 AD.

Cyrus' Decree and the First Wave

As we noted above, Cyrus fulfills the prophesy of Isaiah 44:28-45:1 that God would raise him up to deliver the people from their exile in Babylon. Again, this is anticipated by the author of the Chronicles. It is a reminder that even the pagan nations are under the sovereign decree of God and that he will bring about the redemption of his people often at the expense of his enemies. Much of what follows in these sections are family names and numbers of family members who are part of the return. Once again we see the importance laid on being identified as part of the covenant body by name, a principle that is at the root of modern Christian church membership.

Temple Rebuilding Begins

It took two years before the Temple foundations began to be re-laid. The reason for the delays? Haggai tells us that the people started by taking care of their own homes first and not beginning with the House of the Lord — a reminder as to how often we skew our priorities.

The more important aspect of this chapter comes when the foundation has been laid. The the people celebrate but those who remember the glory of the old temple, well, they weep, and not for joy, but with sadness at the pathetic first steps that are being made.

Adversaries Arise against the Rebuilding Project

We will see troubles arise throughout the rebuilding of the Temple and the rebuilding of the city walls. What is interesting is that in this case, the trouble begins because the Israelites will not allow the residents of the region to participate. This may seem like an odd thing to debate over, but you must remember that when the Babylonian king conquered the region, he took the majority of the Jewish people out and resettled them around his empire while resettling people from other nationalities into the land of Judah. The Jews returning home would not only have seen these people as ritually unclean but also as combining the Jewish religion with their own pagan ideas — an act of idolatry that dishonors God.

The Temple is Completed for Passover

We should notice the prominence that is given to Passover when it comes to the completion of the Temple. Passover is obviously one of the "Big Three" required festivals (along with Tabernacles and Pentecost), but there is something even more significant than that at work. If you remember the kings that brought reform to Judah, one of the hallmarks of their reform was that they practiced Passover. Thus, when we see Passover mentioned in the return from exile, we should recognize that this is a sign of repentance for sin and reform from the idolatry that had plagued the people for so long.

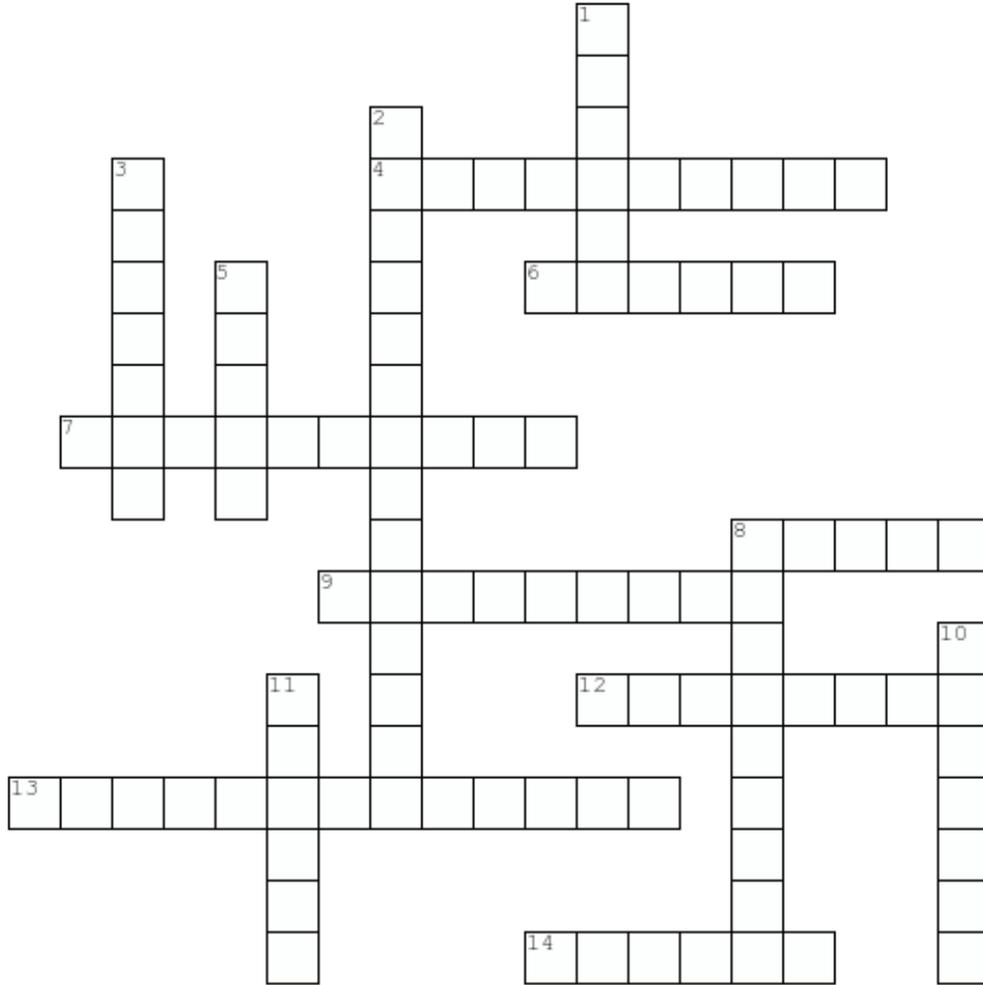
The Second Wave Returns to Jerusalem with Ezra

Ezra is sent to essentially fulfill what we would today refer to as "The Great Commission." We are told that he comes to study the Law of the Lord, to do it, and to teach God's statutes to the people. He is making disciples. And so, Artaxerxes (note that he is also known as Ahasuerus — the same king whom Esther married — speculatively it is possible that Esther may have contributed to the release of Ezra in this second wave — we just do not know for sure.

Israel's Abomination and Confession

As we close out Ezra, it becomes clear that the people had engaged in intermarriage with those of the nations who had been moved into Jerusalem at the exile. To us in the "melting-pot" of America, this probably does not seem so scandalous. Yet, it is. Apart from the fact that the people are considered ritually unclean, they also practice idolatry and are syncretizing pagan faiths with Judaism. And God does not share. Every time in history where the men of Israel have married the daughters of the nations, the people fell into idolatry, here this is clearly forbidden and condemned. Ezra will lead the people in a prayer of corporate confession and then the people will confess their own sins as well and the names of those guilty are finally listed for all of posterity to see.

Week 16a: Ezra



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Across

4. This king of Assyria relocated the people of his empire to Jerusalem.
6. This king of Persia permitted the people to start rebuilding again.
7. This man led the first group of returning exiles.
8. Ezra declared fasting and prayer by this river.
9. This was one of the prophets God sent to motivate the people into building.
12. The temple was complete for the celebration of this feast day.
13. The great abomination of some of the people.
14. The Uri and Thummim had to be consulted by a _____.

Down

1. This son of Jozadak was a priest who led the offerings...distinct as his name, transliterated into Greek would be 'Jesus.'
2. This Babylonian king took the vessels of the temple, which Cyrus would give back.
3. Even this group of men had Cannanite, Egyptian, etc... wives
5. This Persian king would issue a decree to send Israel home.
8. Another name for King Artaxerxes.
10. Instead of a band of soldiers to protect the resources brought by Ezra, he ordered a group of _____ to protect it.
11. The people returning were expected to repair this first.